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Memories and Memoranda of Forty and Fifty Years Ago

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By

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MILWAUKEE
BURDICK & ALLEN, PRINTERS
1907

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To my friend

John Cleves Short,

Walnut Hills,

Cincinnati, Ohio.

You have actually succeeded in getting this that I have often promised myself to write out. I wish it were plainer; be assured it could not be truer. You in your Kentucky lineage may not have always heard this other story.

Affectionately yours,

Joseph W. Sanderson, D.D.,

Once Capt. Bat'y "G," 3d Pa. Art'y.

My Dear Cleves:

When one draws near to the "three score and ten" the mind grows philosophic as a sign thereof, whatever may have been its bent or bias.

I have preached to others, to write their own biography. No editor may ever use the blue pencil on it; no publisher may bid for it; but if for no other reason than to bring home a great truth, viz.: that a wonderful Providence has been in and through it all. This I know and am persuaded of; though confessing, I have never before began to write my past. It was simply when I had preached to others, yet failed to practice.

My early manhood, I am sure, was lived in the most eventful period of this, and by that token, of any nation—the era of the great Civil War.

May I tell you the story? Setting naught down in the bitterness of the days, now happily overpast for ever, nor in the foolishness of either of extreme youth or of dotage.

I was born January 10, 1839, which at this date, April, 1907, gives me fortunately the state of mind vivid as to the past, and clear as to much of what entered into well known history.

I think I can call myself an American, of a fairly good type; that is, of native birth, of Christian parentage; trained to high ideals of patriotism and the civic virtues, as these were urged north of the Mason and

Dixon's line. My mother was of Quaker ancestry; my father of Scotch-Irish extraction; both of Philadelphia. He was an old line Whig, naturally a Federalist, and not of any State's rights political predilection.

My youth, as it bordered on early manhood in the closing fifties, took easily to the stir of the political movements of that distinctive period. I think there was in the youngsters with me of that day more of a deepening of political reasons than the partisanship of earlier or more recent years in the young men approaching the exercise of their franchise. True, it was a day when men took their religion and their politics more seriously than customarily. Commonly, it is noted, that "a man gets his religion from his mother, and his politics from his father." In that day the younger men apart from their impressionable natures were less open to parental bias; they were open eyed witnesses of the great crisis near at hand. Though none in all the land dreamed the fulness of things soon to be the talk of the world.

Let me now state in all soberness the sum of the matter, and whatever may follow will not prove it otherwise.

1. There was a growing need for more slave territory; warranted or unwarranted, as the case might be.

2. The contrary interpretations of the Constitution, as to the jurisdiction of the states, were of themselves purely academic questions.

3. Slavery was, of course, a matter of state regula-

tions; an institution, apart from any moral phase of the individual state.

4. Whether there was a conspiracy to force the issue, at all hazards, to meet this demand for slavery extension, is a fact that can be inferred, though not established. It looked that way then to me. It seems so now in the march of events.

5. Out of the academic question of states rights came the theory, long held by many in secret, though never forcefully advanced, of the right of a state to secede. (Observe it is a dead theory today. There is not a state in the Union that would withdraw if it could. Indeed, it would fight to remain within the Union.)

So the *"Right to Secede"* was made to have an undue value in the insistance on more territory for slavery. As it is totally a dead issue now, it looks as if it were made a stalking horse to gain an unholy end.

As I am in this outlining the motives and movements of the closing "fifties"—and before I try to narrate anything personal in the war that soon came on—let me ask you to weigh the probabilities that the Civil War was the outcome of a *conspiracy*. This, then, relieves the question of its old time fierce controversy about slavery, pro and con, and relieves the masses of the people North and South of the awful responsibility for that war. Men sided rapidly on either side of the debate who would have gravely refused to array themselves against each other in battle.

Though bitterness long indulged in sooner or later terminates in the deadly insult—and then the fatal blow.

6. Slavery, while it was the one uppermost theme in the preceding days, was not the issue in nor the outcome of the war.

That institution died as an accident of the war. It was extinguished as a *military necessity,* after the states in arms against the Union had been formally and solemnly warned by President Lincoln, that if on a certain future date they were yet arrayed, an emancipation proclamation would be issued by the Commander of the Army and Navy of the U. S. The Civil War was for the Union as against those who would destroy the National structure. Of course there was engendered such a sectional hostility as to be called an "Irrepressible Conflict." Bad blood, such as it was, had to be treated surgically before there could be whole and wholesome conditions. (I have sometimes thought that the fathers who coined the preamble to the Constitution in those words, *"In order to form a more perfect Union,"* either wrote it better than they realized, or were prophetic of the times these very days in which we live—when *"a more perfect Union"* exists; thanks be to the Most High!)

But what could you expect when rabid abolitionists and equally rabid "Fire-eaters" were the fierce controversialists in those former days? Both are silent now, and forever.

Before President Buchanan's administration there

was a very slow growth in the northern states of the *Free Soil* party. So slow were men to perceive the quiet aggression of the leaders moving for slave territory. But the four years then were astir through the discovery of this motive. Thousands who were passive on the question of slavery, *per se,* became remonstrants against the extension in the newly formed states.

The approach of a presidential election in 1860 left only an almost unperceptible handful of men without a conviction on either side. It seemed almost too late to plead for another cause, be it ever so holy, as Union, to hold its place in the public mind. On the election of Abraham Lincoln, in November, 1860, there was a pause, an end of the former controversy. It was like the etherization of the patient before moving him into the operating room. In the North there was no thought of war, even at the news of one state after another in the South moving by legislative conclusion to withdraw from the Union. Yet war was by them determined to effect what their states had decreed.

I was drawn into the military spirit, such as it was in the North, without one thought of actual or possible war—just as our young men enroll themselves in their National Guards, for the fancy of the thing, its disciplinary and social advantages.

Not even in face of news from the South of war-like activities going on was the stern fact believed. Indeed, their preparedness for and the Northern incredulity about any possible strife, accounts largely for our continued defeats in almost every battle early in

the war. We were slow to learn the trade of soldiering, and we paid the penalty of our unbelief.

It may seem to you incredible that when the flag was fired on in Charleston harbor, April, 1861, the word was as a "bolt out of the blue," as swift as the formation of a cyclone, and as awful. I never knew, or had I not known it, could have dreamed it was possible to move the entire North as that one insult to the flag, and the blow at the life of the Nation. It was almost incredible; but it revealed how complete the conspiracy was. To think that an institution, that had never been assailed save by theorists and self-constituted philanthropists, should now become the prevening cause of the costliest, bloodiest, bitterest war in modern history!

In an hour slavery ceased to be even deemed an issue or a factor.

The government could have had a half million young lives; in fact, they offered themselves and were refused. The powers at Washington were so sure that sixty or eighty thousand men could within ninety days march through to the Gulf and smash armed opposition, that only these were accepted. I saw men actually cry with vexation at being denied their patriotism. I was as elated at being chosen as if I had received a high command.

On April 24, '61, I was mustered into the Commonwealth Artillery of Pennsylvania as a high private, and set to the task of keeping little Delaware from joining the stampede of the Southern states under their

strange flag and constitution. This, it is pleasant to narrate, was successfully accomplished, and then after three months, when the magnitude of the Confederate idea began to be believed, the authorities at Washington were eager to enlist men to any extent, and before four years received over a million and a half of soldiers.

It fully needed that many to win out against the *"other American"* soldiers and their stout, magnificent bravery.

But remember, it not only required an overwhelming force, but the other side were fighting on *"interior lines"* and we had to surround them. It was a vast area, and a big job. It took four full years to exhaust the other side—yet what could you expect when you recall their Americanism. While the fierceness of battling reveals the intensity of feeling so long engendered over slavery and its correlate, the "Right to Secede;" this last, remember, was once but an inference born of the academic question of states soverignty, as a construction of the constitution.

Well, the war was on after the Bull Run disaster, no doubt about that. Both sides were aroused to the meaning, though not to the full measure of it all. The whole land was an armed camp, recruiting, drilling, marching, fighting. Victories and defeats came alternately; sometimes in one unbroken series. The men of the South, for evident reasons, took to the fighting line. Their officers were the picked men of West Point Academy, who entered at once into the war as if they had been long expecting this issue.

At this late day I should be entirely dispassionate, and so be free to make these broad generalizations, viz.: That the Southern cause had enthusiasm, preparedness and a high and gifted military generalship. The Federal cause had simply *the holy thought of the Union*, with greater resources of men and money. The Confederacy had the sympathy abroad of nations and men, who, to say the least, disliked the Republic, and who would dare to break the blockade we had placed over that coast. Fortunate we were more fortunate in the naval spirit, as indeed the navy had been more *national* in its expression. Under the flag and in foreign waters there was less of the disunion feeling among the officers than in the army circles.

I find, my dear friend, that this paper tends less to the *personal* you have so urged me to relate; but as I am never again to recount the war, its cause, continuance and conclusion, nothing less than the foregoing could be said. You may have the narrative of the battles told you in the written histories of that period. Let this be now more as you have asked for it, as though we were all again before the open fire in that attractive library in your home.

Of battles you can have the thrill of sensations more vividly described to you by men capable of reproducing these. Of marches, well, any old tramp can portray the same. I would rather in this paper set down, not in order, but as they come to mind, some certain incidents that have not lost their etching upon my memory.

When that famous "change of base" was decided on by Gen. McClellan, I was ordered to destroy the stores at White House Landing prior to the movement, making a new base at Harrison's Landing. What was done in a few hours could help you see where the millions of cost that was distributed or evaporated. Quartermaster stores, Commissary, forage, etc., all the impedimenta of a vast army, sanitary and medical supplies by the trainload, etc., etc., together with a mighty total of sutler's supplies. The destruction of this last, while not pitiful, was tearful to those disinterested patriots, the sutlers. You may see photos of some of the systematic methods Sherman's army used in destruction. At White House it was a Chicago fire in volume and loss. The main purpose was to leave the enemy absolutely nothing in the way of salvage. One lone gunboat stood by us until the destruction was complete, and to stand off Jeb Stuart's eager, hungry wreckers. They and the sutlers were the only mourners at the moment.

I would like to speak of the personality of some of the commanders I saw or knew: McClellan, Fitz-John Porter (my ideal), Butler (not my ideal), Meade, Miles, Dix, Ord, Custer, Sheridan and Grant. I had at times such an assorted variety of service that I came in touch with most of the above, but mention at length is here forbidden.

One evening in March, 1865, I received orders from City Point to dismantle a bridge and throw it across at Deep Bottom to cross Gen. Sheridan in the morning.

This was done with the help of a gunboat to anchor the bridge in the swift current, and in the morning Custer, with his riders, who had left Winchester just one month before, had swung through the state, and with Devins were pushing to our left. I had Custer as my guest while his command was passing. That night we replaced the pontoon back at Jones Landing and crossed Gen. Ord with the 18th Corps, also to the left. It was always to the left through two weeks to cut off Lee's retreat from Petersburg. Again it was a Sunday, just a fortnight from the date of my former order—suddenly a heavy explosion was heard from the direction of Richmond, twelve miles away; within a few hours another deep roar came down the wind, and then it was an easy guess what was going on. It was the enemy's gunboats being blown up preparatory to the evacuation of the long desired city. During the night yet another explosion and we were eager to move up and in at once. Some of my youngsters slipped away to be in at the death; they returned by noon of the next day with the sure word and mementoes of the fact that the way was open. I had been waiting for four years and now was as eager as any of my soldiers. Just then an order came from Gen. Grant to move the bridges up as fast as we could get rid of the torpedoes, for the upper river from Dutch Gap to the Rockets was full of these contrivances. I rode over the territory between our outer lines the twelve miles without meeting a soul, then suddenly reaching a hill top, lo, there was the city

all in flames, so it seemed. The end was at hand and peace was only a question of hours.

This was the ending of four years, the longest, fullest four years of my life. What that had meant to hundreds of thousands of homes and a half a million lives, who had felt the bitter cost, I may not even attempt to say. But the war was over. A braver foe was never met; dogged, resourceful and hopeful, even when they knew, as some of their deserters used to put it, that *"the dog was dead."* Von Moltke is reported to have called these armies, North and South, as an *"armed mob."* He never dreamed of such soldiers, for they don't grow them anywhere else.

I saw two men, the greatest of all that great epoch, one riding into his kingdom, and four years later the other sorrowfully riding out of his. On the morning of February 22, 1861, at sunrise of Washington's birthday, I saw Abraham Lincoln raise the flag at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Lincoln, the flag and Independence Hall on Washington's birthday. Do you measure the association it all meant to my eager soul that eventful reveille? Then one morning in April, 1865, at Richmond, I met Gen. Robert E. Lee crossing my pontoon bridge to his home after all was over—the last vision of *"The Lost Cause"* this land should ever see.

And between these dates it was all *war*. Imagine it as you may, and emphasize the word as you choose.

From April, 1861, until I was mustered out in November, 1865, I was privileged to see much of men

and movements. With McClellan on the peninsula to Harrison's Landing, and then after recovery in the autumn of 1862 recruiting my battery "G" 3d Penn. Artillery. The spring campaign of 1863 began early, as Longstreet had us for a month at Suffolk "bottled up" while he was gathering all the possible supplies in that rich region and in preparation for the campaign that summer, which culminated at Gettysburg—the first real decisive victory won by us in the East. My service the balance of that year carried me to the eastern shore, to Gettys station, and then through the winter on general court marshal duty. The spring of 1864 arrived, with Gen. Grant in command in the East, forging, fighting, flanking through to the James River, each mile lengthening his base of supplies until the river was reached, when presto, the case was reversed and Gen. Lee had to do the stretching.

One night in May, while waiting at Fort Monroe for active service, I was directed to take two hundred men on a night move under sealed orders, which were to capture the signal stations on the James River. A silent river since McClellan had sailed down it in July, 1862. The orders above were carried out successfully and gave the Army of the James its opportunity to reach the upper waters and so make readiness for Grant when he should appear.

I was then ordered to report to Admiral S. P. Lee, in command of the James River Division of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. It meant what was then a strange and mysterious work, the torpedo serv-

ice. The torpedo to us was a wierd and almost unknown factor in war, but familiarity of it did not breed contempt, kept us all in respectful attitude, for many were the scares that summer.

At the beginning of the war I made my application personal to Secretary Welles of the Navy for an appointment in the Marine Corps. It was conditionally promised, but never realized. However, I had the contact with the navy men I once desired, and with this finest group of naval heroes had one of the pleasantest experiences of my days of soldiering. These men, like Lee, Nichols, Beaumont, Fyffe, Calhoun, McCook, Miller, had learned the art and spirit of their calling under the Porters, Decaturs and Bainbridges of former days, and were in turn the preceptors of the Deweys, Clarkes and Sampsons of '98.

By the autumn of '64 I had lost so many of my men through swamp duty and river work at night that I applied for a change of duty, and was given the pontoon service of the Army of Potomac and James. This held until the end was near, and at last, when Richmond was taken, we moved the bridges up the James River as fast as the torpedoes could be removed, and their remained until the close of May. In this pontoon service I crossed Sheridan's army as it swung down through Virginia on its way to round up things at the last, and while in Richmond the 18th and 25th Corps of Army of James, the 2d, 5th and 6th of Army of Potomac, and soon thereafter the 14th, 15th, 17th and

20th of Sherman's forces, fresh from their hike through Georgia and the Carolinas.

Early in June I was ordered back to Ft. Monroe, and until November, 1865, formed part of the garrison in charge of President Jefferson Davis, Mr. Clement C. Clay and John Mitchell.

Before leaving Richmond let me relate an incident which I think gives in a flash a view of the state of men's minds in the Southern army at the immediate close of the war. We got the news of Mr. Lincoln's death on Monday following the Friday he was shot. Before that for days the city was full of the blue and gray, in all the honest appreciation each felt for the other.

That Monday not a Confederate was seen. The feeling was so intense. But that afternoon with some officers in passing we dropped in at a quiet saloon and there found three Confederate officers. Of course I looked for trouble at once. When one of these turned and in that pleasant voice of theirs said: "I see you are a Federal officer! Will you allow me to join with you in sincerest sorrow over the death of *'our'* President? Think of it! He added, "I am a Georgian Colonel from Gen. Johnson's army and have had four years of this all, and am now on my way home to turn to my farm."

(Cleves, I believe that was the heart feeling of every true man in the South regarding Mr. Lincoln, and would have obviated all the accursed misrule and horrors of the carpet bag regime.)

I found Mr. Davis looking as you have his picture.

It has been remarked of him that he was strong in his likes and dislikes of men. He greeted me most pleasantly, and ever after that when I came on duty as officer of the day and was required to see the prisoners every two hours until "Grand Rounds," I was made cordially welcome. Often in the evening after the posts were visited I would spend the two hours with him (he had some good cigars), and then his conversation opened up freely and found me a good listener. He would not speak of the war, or of the prominent figures in it, but mainly of his memories of the time when he was in the senate, and of the Mexican war. It was of vast fascination to me all this history of a period when the central figures were household names. I may also mention that he gave me earnest talks on religion, for he was a devout man, and I was almost a pagan. For this and his practical advice I fervently am grateful.

Mr. C. C. Clay, Jr., also prisoner along with Mr. Davis, I recall as a charming personality, to whom it was a pleasure to be of any service. On leaving him in November he gave me a two dollar Confederate note which had a good likeness of him as a vignette, on the back he had written these pleasant words: "Capt. Sanderson, God grant you may never need the kindness you have shown me in deed.

C. C. Clay, Jr., Huntsville, Ala."

And now the war was over and we were homeward bound, to take up the new life of citizenship. It is all a far cry from those forty or fifty years ago to

now—from soldier life to pastorate—from that sunny Southland to this Northwest—from an artilleryman to a Presbyterian. I am glad and grateful for the experiences that happened, and which did not destroy me; for the associations formed; for the ventures safely met; but most all, that as the war was possibly inevitable, it did bring in such blessed results, that I personally was a unit in the mass, and today with a vivid recollection of it all.

Cleves, the Nation is now for you and the men who are to enlarge it and lift it to its divine place in the evident purpose of our God.

Thanking you for provoking me to try and tell the story of that wonder era in human history, I am,

Affectionately your friend,

Joseph W. Sanderson, D.D.,
Late Capt. "G" Batty 3d Pa. Arty.

Beaver Dam, Wis., April, 1907.

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